

3 1761 06559900 3

BRIEF

NK

0004812

4
y.l. no.

ART AND LABOUR



A
REPRINT
OF TWO ARTICLES
BY W·R·LETHABY



Presented to the
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
LIBRARY

by the
ONTARIO LEGISLATIVE
LIBRARY

1980

48327

ART AND LABOUR

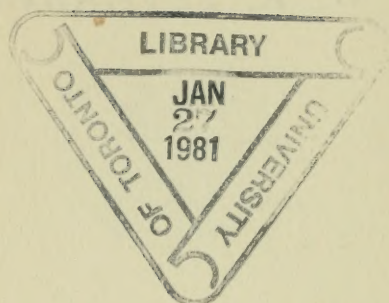
A REPRINT OF TWO ARTICLES

W. R. LETHABY^N

48327

DESIGN & INDUSTRIES ASSOCIATION
6, QUEEN SQUARE, LONDON, W.C. 1

1917



BRIEF
NK
0004812

NK

ART AND WORKMANSHIP.

WE have been in the habit of writing so lyrically of art and of the temperament of the artist that the average man who lives in the street, sometimes a very mean street, is likely to think of it as remote and luxurious, not "for the likes of him." There is the danger in habitual excess of language that the plain man is likely to be frightened by it. It may be feared that much current exposition of the place and purpose of art only widens the gap between it and common lives.

A proper function of criticism should be to foster our national arts and not to frighten timid people off with high-pitched definitions and far-fetched metaphors mixed with a flood of (as Morris said) "sham technical twaddle." It is a pity to make a mystery of what should most easily be understood. There is nothing occult about the thought that all things may be made well or made ill. A work of art is first of all a well-made thing. It may be a well-made statue or a well-made chair, or a well-made book. Art is not a special sauce applied to ordinary cooking; it is the cooking itself if it is good. Most simply and generally art may be thought of as *the well-doing of what needs doing*. If the thing is not worth doing it can hardly be a work of art, however well it may be done. A thing worth doing which is ill done is hardly a thing at all.

Fortunately people are artists who know it not—bootmakers (the few left), gardeners and basket-makers, and all players of games. We do not allow shoddy in cricket or football, but reserve it for

serious things like houses and books, furniture and funerals.

If it is necessary that everything must be translated into words, our art critics might occupy quite a useful place if they would be good enough to realise that behind the picture shows of the moment is the vast and important art of the country, the arts of the builder, furniture maker, printer and the rest, which are matters of national well-being.

It is doubtful if we have it in us to form a leading school of painting at the present time ; indeed, we seem to be occupied in trying to catch up with Europe at the wrong moment. It cannot be doubted, however, that we might lead in the domestic arts. And this is shown by the great interest which foreign observers take in the English arts and crafts movement. The Germans, indeed, who know the history of this development in England better than we do ourselves, realising its importance from an economic point of view, have gone so far as to constitute a special branch of political economy which shall deal with the subject. One university, I believe, has established a professor's chair in the economics of arts and crafts. English study of fine lettering has in Germany been put into types which English printers are hastening to buy. We have now many highly trained men among us who might make books as notable as those of the finest presses if there were a steady demand for fine modern work.

During the last thirty years many English designers have set themselves to learn the crafts as artists ; that is, so that they may have complete mastery of both design and workmanship. I may remark here that a characteristic of a work of art is that the design inter-

penetrates workmanship as in a painting, so that one may hardly know where one ends and the other begins. The master-workman, further, must have complete control from first to last to shape and finish as he will. If I were asked for some simple test by which we might hope to know a work of art when we saw one I should suggest something like this : *Every work of art shows that it was made by a human being for a human being.* Art is the humanity put into workmanship, the rest is slavery. The difference between a man-made work and a commercially-made work is like the difference between a gem and paste. We may not be able to tell the difference at first, but, when we find out, the intrinsic worth of the one is self-evident. Still it is highly important that commercial work shall be properly done after its own kind.

Although a machine-made thing can never be a work of art in the proper sense, there is no reason why it should not be good in a secondary order—shapely, smooth, strong, well fitting, useful ; in fact, like a machine itself. Machine-work should show quite frankly that it is the child of the machine ; it is the pretence and subterfuge of most machine-made things which make them disgusting.

In the reaction from the dull monotony of early Victorian days it must be admitted that many workers fell into the affectation of over-designing their things. Rightly understood, "design" is not an agony of contortion but an effort to arrive at what will be obviously fit and true. The best design is one which, cost apart, should become a commonplace. A fine piece of furniture or a fine book-binding should be shaped as inevitably as a fiddle.

Usually the best method of designing has been to improve on an existing model by bettering it a point at a time ; a perfect table or chair or book has to be very well bred.

Another phase of the reaction from modern ways has been an excessive regard for old things, so that original workers have not had a fair chance of maintaining the full traditions of their arts. For instance, the social results of "collecting old furniture," of course were not foreseen, but they certainly inflicted great injury on an essentially noble craft. At the present moment people who would like to do things in the best way would be well advised to have what they require made by capable men in modern forms. Now that we know all about it there is something pawnshoppy about gatherings from auctions, and the highly misdirected skill of the imitator has often made it next to impossible for even the expert to tell the difference between an original work and a copy.

Of course the scarcity, value and historical interest of old pictures, and books printed by Caxton, made it inevitable that they should be sought for and bought at great prices, but undoubtedly such collecting of antiques has had a most injurious effect on all kinds of modern production.

Of many problems this one of bringing back art to workmanship is not the least serious, or the most hopeful. It is a tremendous thing that whereas a century or so ago the great mass of the people exercised arts, such as boot-making, book-binding, chair-making, smithing, and the rest, now a great wedge has been driven in between the craftsman of every kind and his customers by the method of large production by machinery. "We cannot go back"

—true ; and it is as true that we cannot stay where we are.

Once more let me try to make it clear that by art, instructed thinkers don't only mean pictures or quaint and curious things, or necessarily costly ones, certainly not luxurious ones. They mean worthy and complete workmanship by competent workmen.

Art is thoughtful workmanship.

THE FOUNDATION IN LABOUR.

BY way of text to my little sermon, the words occur to me: "Let him labour with his hands." By way of illustration to my subject, the following little story was told me only an hour ago from some lives of early Breton saints. A monk of, say, the sixth century, having laboured in the fields all day found that a little bird had built its nest in the mantle he had laid on the ground. Understanding what labour meant, he lent his cloak to the bird for the rest of the season.

I was asked to lecture on Art in the life of the worker, but I begged to be allowed to change the title into *Work and the Worker*. I find the word Art is a very ambiguous one which wants yards of definition before one can venture to say anything clear about it; and, for myself, I have long settled that what I elected to call Art was not some high essence which might lead to æsthetic excitements, but simply any sound and complete form of human work: the art of agriculture, the art of cookery, the art of picture painting, and so on. Human work, I say, not machine grinding. Machining is no more real work than hand-organ noises are real music.

As societies and men come of age in the several ages of the world they awake to the consciousness that they make use of words and that little but custom settles the meaning of those words. Justice, art, morality, what do they mean? Then custom itself begins to break up and a new problem arises. The question is not now, What do the words actually mean? but, As we have these nice words in use,

what meaning shall we fit to them? "Philosophy, religion, liberty, the State," what shall we make these old words mean? This was the problem of Plato; this is the problem of to-day. Now we find ourselves in the possession of the little word Art, about which such heaps of rubbish have been written and in the name of which so many sillinesses are committed. What shall we make it mean?

Philosophers have noticed that certain forms of production tend to be free from direct material service and to become media for expressing emotion directed to the end of giving delight, or stimulus, to others. Modern use is in favour of trying to limit the use of the word Art to this æsthetic essence or its manifestation. Now this would be all right if it were not all wrong, wrong in history and wrong in results. Historically, the word Art has meant work, production, making, doing, and it was not conceived that the spirit, the expression, the meaning of the several kinds of work could be separated from a residuum which without it becomes brute labour. Art is the *substance* as well as the *expression*; it is the *labour* as well as the *emotion*; it is the *service* as well as the *delight*; and the two aspects cannot be torn apart except to the ruin of both.

Thus the art of speech may be conceived as oratory, eloquence or rhetoric, but these things are only dangerous diseases without the serious meaning and purpose. There is an attractive æsthetic of the cooking art, but it is dangerous if too much thought is given to its thrills. Art, the æsthetic ones say, is intuition, imagination, pure lyricism, and so on and on. Very true in a way, but very dangerous. It is only true, indeed, when you say nothing about it.

Tell a child that his manners and ways and tricks are wonderful art, and if you can get him to understand you have killed the free beauty (which was inherent in healthy action) into affectation and etiquette. Our concern is with the veracities of conduct, speech, work ; the expression, the beauty, the emotion will take care of themselves. Do I make myself clear ? I do not deny the poetical content of workmanship, but what I do say is : Keep the work, the service, the meaning, strong and healthy, and due expression is bound to be there, too. In concentrating too much on the emotional content in certain chosen forms, as poetry, music, painting, you are, firstly, beating down other forms of production into non-arts, into mere brute labour ; and, secondly, by isolating those very selected arts themselves too much from service and the common understanding you lay them open to speedy disease and decay. Beauty is the flowering of labour and service. There are things, indeed, so beautiful that you must always pretend you don't see them, and notice them out of the corner of the eye, as you see a linnet in a nest.

Art, then, I elect to say, is sound and complete human workmanship. A work of art is a well-made boot, a well-made chair, a well-made picture.

The purpose of this little lecture is to say that to me work is not only art, but it is almost everything else as well. The "Curse" if you will, but also the blessing, the discipline, the subject-matter of life. Work is great Necessity, one of the absolute things. We have to learn to accept, and even to worship, work. We live by consumption, consumption of fuel, food, clothing, service. Is it not strange that

this should be obviously so and yet that there is no body of teaching as to this great prime essential of life? I remember only a few years ago reading the pronouncement of some sweet and cultivated soul as to the ideal man. The ideal man, he thought, should be a Christian, a gentleman, a scholar and an athlete, and I almost think he had to have a sense of humour as well. Very nice, though, perhaps, a little cloistered; but really not thick enough for life. We must gather together a teaching about life which recognises that life is founded on work. We have to induce a deep reverence for work and the worker. Work is paying one's way; it is service; it is honour and righteousness. There may have been other words for other times, but for us the password is *Work*. In the last few generations—there are fashions in these things—there has been much talk of self-sacrifice, very confusing, as I can testify, to growing youths; but there has been far too little telling about service, service of cleaning drains, ploughing and building. Why is it so? Why is the great continuous and necessary martyrdom of hard labour so universally and constantly ignored?

There have been deep historical causes which have led philosophers and teachers of all kinds to ignore the basis of life in work and to strike in with their thinking on remote planes all in the air. For one thing, the problems, or, at least, the kind of problems which philosophers have ever since gone turning round and round, were set by the Greeks, and notably by Plato. Now the Greek State was founded on slavery, and it simply did not do for the boldest thinkers to question that. Labour was provided by the very constitution of things, and the great talking

men worried little more about it than we do about the philosophies of horses and cows. After correcting their slaves in the morning they would put on the philosopher's garb, meet in the portico, and discourse exquisitely on the nature of justice and the essence of æsthetic delight.

At what we call the revival of learning, we took over all this body of thought and called it specifically philosophy, not recognising that it was in no sense a complete scheme of thinking for life (for you cannot live on theories as to how you really know knowledge, but have to have bread and boots as a preliminary). Philosophy thus became the thinking of those with nothing else to do.

Now at the end of the classical period another way of thinking arose which involved in some degree a philosophy of labour. It seems to have been obscured and overlaid, but still there it is, and an objecting modern thinker has called it slave morality. How far it was complete I will not venture to say, but, looking at it historically, it may not be denied that Christianity did include within itself a body of teaching in regard to the slave, the labourer, the poor. It was, to some degree at least, the scheme of thinking of working men.

Turning from this backward view, it seems to me that in all the weltering, infinite field of thought possibilities we just at this time can only hope to find a firm constructive centre in the idea of a noble, just, and inclusive civilisation. A civilisation inspired by a teaching which shall not ignore the groundwork, the first needs of life, but which shall be based here and now on common labour, a common life, and a common aim.

I do not say this as an idealist and would-be philanthropist, but as one who wants a more reasonable and beautiful world for himself. As it is, one cannot sufficiently hide away from the ugliness of things under about £4,000 a year, a country house and two motors.

The question of machinery is one that troubles many minds, as well it may. At times I am drawn to the belief that machinery, gunpowder, electricity are too astounding powers for feeble-willed men to control. Indeed, it is quite thinkable that machinery is the wrecking force in the world, which will, in fact, be shattered by it. But, some will say, "Machinery has come to stay." That may be true. Drunkenness seems to have come to stay, but we have at least to try to *control* it. Machine production has, in fact, swiftly changed the character of our population, and whereas, not many generations ago, they were mostly craftsmen—that is, little artists—they are now an aggregate of machine-tenders under gangers. These are the sort of facts which political economists never foresaw. Machinery is such a mighty power that it must be controlled; and I must say that mass production by machinery should imply production for the mass. No single individual should fire off a powerful machine for his own profit any more than he should work a cannon in Oxford Street to the terror of well-doers. The owner of machinery must be licensed to shoot. In truth, machinery is the artillery of commerce, and it must be controlled by wise generalship. We have as much right to control any form of machinery as we have to protect ourselves from firearms.

At the same time, all our ideals are so complicated

by the huge question of international commerce that our very survival through this machine age may depend on our working the cranks and wheels as well as others. The position may be likened to that of a coach plunging down-hill after a team of maddened horses. It is not the time for any horse or the driver to give way to his private wishes to lie down ; the facts of the position may best be dealt with by racing along. Nevertheless, machinery must be controlled ; it must not be allowed, for instance, to ruin our towns and countryside so much as in the immediate past. Machinery must be controlled.

I shall be told that I have ignored brain-work ; so in a way I have, as I have ignored amusement work. Much of this talk of brain-work is a trick parallel to the dividing off of art from labour. Do you not think that the skipper of the fishing-boat or the thatcher of the corn-rick works with his brain as usefully as a company promoter or member of Parliament ? Why, of course he does. But we do want brain-work in the modern sense, the very best that may be got, and it is worth paying extortionate charges, as we do to good doctors, if we cannot get it otherwise. But it needs to be good brain-work used in the interest of civilisation and not forming a camp against it. How might we hope to secure that ?

We have to set up a sympathetic and understanding contract between all brain-workers and the completer men who work both with hands and brain. How may our brain-workers, directors and teachers obtain such a contact with labour ? First, some teaching about the service of labour must be got into all our educational schemes, not only in the elementary schools—the children there are likely to

learn in another way later—but at Eton, Oxford, and theological seminaries. It must be impressed in our very natures as one of the *great things* of life.

There are many, especially old-fashioned, people who in their families have had close touch with poverty, who have a horror, deeply inlaid in their hearts, of waste of food. The new automobile way of thinking, "I can pay for it, and do what I like with my own," does not appeal to them; they have a superstition in their very bones that waste of food is what used to be called wicked. Many, I am sure, feel a similar reverence for labour and the results of labour. Waste of food is waste of a means of life; but waste of labour is the waste of life itself, it is half murder, it has something of the horribly and blackly satanic about it. To my mind, it is the great typical modern sin. It had hardly arisen when the Decalogue was written.

This is the point of all others that I have tried to say which I should like to din and dint into your minds by repetition. We have drifted into easy ways of life and live behind screens, really not knowing what the world of winning the bare means of life is like. Money is a key which we apply, and the results of labour just flow from a tap if you have the key. *You get it at shops.*

Consumption, we have even been told, is good for trade. If a better type of civilisation is ever to be developed, one of the very corners of the scheme must be understanding of and reverence for labour. Reverence for labour is the basis of art, for art is the labour which is fully worthy of reverence.

But merely being told is not enough. If ever we are to have a reasonable apprenticeship to life, say,

in 500 years time, it will have to include some actual service in labour. This is not a joke, but a true ideal which I should like for myself and everybody. We all, as part of a normal minimum training in manliness, should be apprenticed to State service for at least a year. No one should be allowed to pass into "brain-work" such as stock-broking without his year of manual drill; and others—members of Parliament, architects, and all kinds of teachers—should, I think, be asked to have two years to show their good faith. If there were this basis of actual experience, then, perhaps, we might hope to control the machines before they tear civilisation to bits.

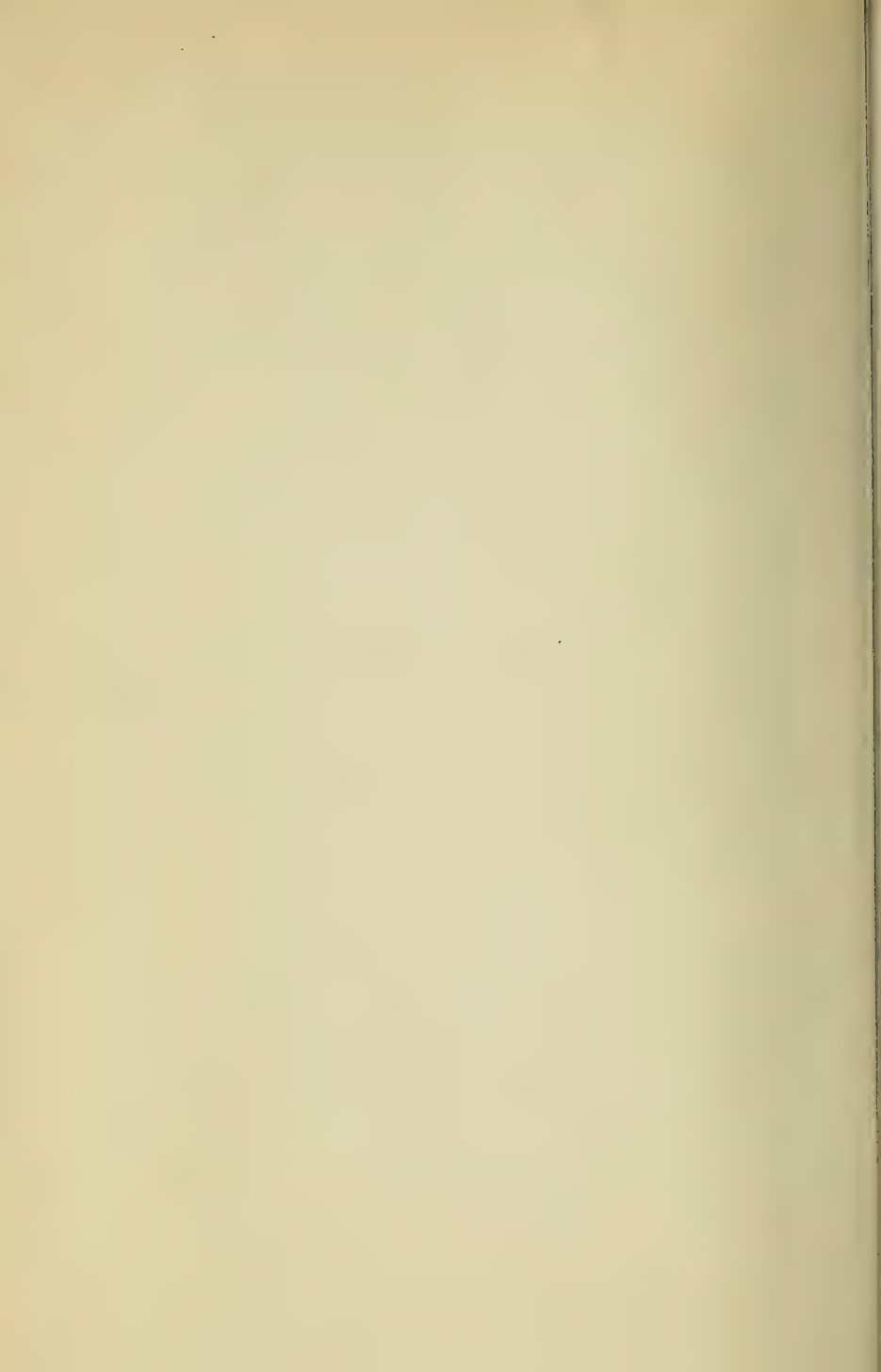
Again, and I suggest this as an immediate policy, some acknowledged turnpike should be made by which a certain percentage of those in our schools may pass into the exercise of skilled crafts and be saved from machine-minding. The skilled crafts or arts must be preserved, and some day we may wake up to find that the welfare of the nation depends on them. I would have the educational bodies provide, as part of their scholarship programme, a few final Establishment-in-Business Bursaries for specially promising students in the technical schools. Ever so small a wicket-gate leading out of the iron city of industrial toil would turn many faces hopefully in that direction, and it would be only an extension of the old and wise apprenticeship provisions.

Art in the life of the worker can only spring of hope and joy. When labour has been organised as an honoured national service, and when our towns have been made tidy and fit to live in, beauty will spring up of itself, and we shall not need any theory of art thrills, for beauty will be about us.

W. R. LETHABY.

The first of these articles was published in No. 1 of "The Imprint," January 1913, and again as a pamphlet issued by the Design and Industries Committee in February 1915. The second was first published in "The Highway," March 1917

Copies of this booklet can be obtained from the Design and Industries Association, Price 6d.





LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

"Design and Industry." (Out of print).

"A New Body with New Aims."
Price 3d., post free.

"A Modern Creed of Work." By
A. Clutton Brock. Price 6d., post free.

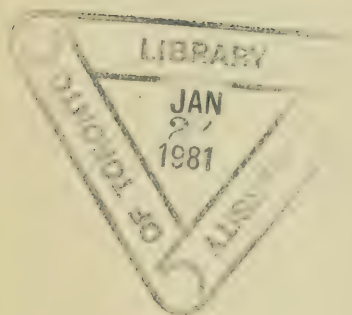
"Art and Labour." Being a reprint of
"Art and Workmanship" and "The
Foundation in Labour," by W. R.
Lethaby. Price 6d., post free.

PUBLISHED BY THE EDINBURGH BRANCH

"An Edinburgh Address on Design and
Industry." By Frank Pick. Price 3d.,
post free.



PRINTED IN LONDON
BY SANDERS PHILLIPS
AND COMPANY^{LD} AT
THE BAYNARD PRESS
688 UPPER THAMESST





PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

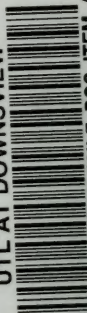
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY

BRIEF

NK

0004812

UTL AT DOWNSVIEW



D RANGE BAY SHLF POS ITEM C
39 11 12 15 01 006 7